DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 428 903 PS 027 491

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TITLE The Development of Children's Same-Sex Peer Preferences: Labeling versus Play Styles.
PUB DATE 1999-04-00
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Albuquerque, NM, April 15-18, 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Comparative Analysis; *Labeling (of Persons); *Peer Relationship; Play; *Preschool Children; Preschool Education; Sex
IDENTIFIERS *Childrens Preferences; *Play Style; Same Sex Friendship; Same Sex Interaction; Same Sex Peers; Sex Segregation

ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of play styles and gender labeling on children's peer preferences. Thirty-six preschool children viewed pictures of other children playing and were asked to point to whom they wanted to play with. One group of children chose between a boy wrestling with a neutral doll and a girl hugging the neutral doll. Another group of children chose between a boy hugging the neutral doll and a girl wrestling with the neutral doll. The findings indicated that children in both conditions preferred children of the same sex regardless of the play style portrayed in the picture. Overall, this study suggests that the child's sex may be more influential in gender segregation than play styles. (KB)

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The Development of Children's Same-Sex Peer Preferences: Labeling versus Play Styles

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Abstract

Children's preference for same-sex playmates is known as gender segregation and is a cross-cultural phenomenon. The purpose of this study was to experimentally investigate the influence of play styles and gender labeling on children's' peer preferences. Children saw pictures of other children playing and asked to point to who they wanted to play with. One group of children chose between a boy wrestling with a neutral doll and a girl hugging the neutral doll. Another group of children chose between a boy hugging the neutral doll and a girl wrestling with the neutral doll. Children in both conditions preferred children of the same sex regardless of the play style portrayed in the picture. This study suggests that sex of the child may be more influential in gender segregation than play styles, however future studies will further investigate the phenomenon.

Gender Segregation

In a popular Sunday cartoon called "Calvin and Hobbes," Suzy walks up to Calvin and asks him what he's doing. He pushes her away and says, "Big, important secret things! Go away! Get lost!" She angrily responds, "All right dandelion head! Who cares what you do anyway!" Calvin replies, "*We're* doing great things. *We're* having **fun**!" Sitting alone on the hill, Hobbes says, "I thought we were bored out of our skulls," and Calving responds, "Oh hush, you don't know anything."

In this cartoon, Calvin shows us that sometimes being bored is better than interacting with the opposite sex. Children's avoidance of the opposite sex and preference of same-sex playmates is known as gender segregation.

- Children's preference for same-sex playmates is seen as early as 27 months and increases with age (LaFreniere, Strayer, & Gautheir, 1984; Gottman, 1986).
- By the time children are in elementary school, they prefer same-sex peers 80% of the time and preferences for opposite sex peers is nonexistent (Gottman & Parkhurst, 1980).
- Same-sex peer preference is a cross-cultural phenomenon, although the degree and age of onset varies across cultures (Whiting & Edwards, 1988).
- Gender segregation is greatest in the absence of adult supervision and least when adults provide structure (Lockheed & Klein, 1985; Thorne, 1986; Whiting & Edwards, 1988).

Why does this occur?

No one really has a good understanding as to why children prefer same-sex playmates. Possible explanations include biological theories and socialization theories, however, the most frequently posed theories in the literature are behavioral compatibility and gender labeling.

Behavioral Compatibility

Proponents of behavioral compatibility argue that the two sexes have different

behaviors and children seek out those whose behaviors are compatible with their own. People often argue that boys have a rough and tumble type play style that is not compatible with girls' more cooperative play style. Therefore, children prefer playmates of the same-sex (Haskett, 1971; Maccoby, 1988).

Gender Labeling

Kohlberg (1966) proposed that children who can identify their own and other children's sex become interested in playing with others who are similar to themselves. Research has shown that 50% of children between 27 and 30 months can label the gender of other children (Leinbach & Fagot, 1986). Because labeling occurs around the emergence of same-sex preferences, it's possible that this may influence gender segregation.

How do we distinguish between the two theories?

Most of the work conducted on these two theories has been observational. Although observational studies are advantageous because they provide a window into children's daily lives, there are too many extraneous variables that can influence the results. This is why it is important to also have experimental studies to better understand the phenomenon. The purpose of this study was to cross play styles and gender in an experimental study.

- Can the observational studies be replicated in an experimental setting by showing girls preferring girls who do not play rough and tumble and boys preferring boys who do play rough and tumble?
- How are children's choices affected when they see a girl playing rough and tumble and a boy not playing rough and tumble?

Method

Participants

- Thirty-six children from Bing Nursery School participated in this study.

- There were 21 girls with a mean age of 49.57 months and 15 boys with a mean age of 52.8 months.
- Children were either in the Consistent Condition or the Inconsistent Condition.

Conditions

Children were either in the Consistent Condition or the Inconsistent Condition.

- In the Consistent Condition, children saw a set of pictures depicting girls who do not play rough-and-tumble and boys who do. This is what children are more likely to see in real life.
- In the Inconsistent Condition, children saw a set of pictures depicting girls who play rough-and-tumble and boys who do not. This is what children are less likely to see in real life.

Procedure

The experimenter brought the children into the game room and said,

> *"Pretend these are knew children in your classroom. This is Suzy/Becky* and this is Tommy/Billy. Point to who you want to play with."*

*The gender introduced first was counterbalanced.

Results

The purpose of this study was to tease apart play styles and gender to see which factor influences children's peer preferences. If play styles are what influences children's same-sex preferences then we would expect children to choose the same-sex in the Consistent Condition and the opposite sex in the Inconsistent Condition.

Consistent Condition

In this condition, I essentially replicated what was found in the observational studies.

- Girls preferred girls who didn't have a rough and tumble play style.
- Boys preferred boys who had a rough and tumble play style.

Inconsistent Condition

In this condition, a different pattern emerged. Children now chose playmates who had a different play style then their own.

- Girls still chose the girl even though the girl in the picture was wrestling with the doll.
- Boys still chose the boy even though the boy was hugging the doll.

Conclusions

This study suggests that children prefer same-sex partners because they are motivated to interact with others who are similar to themselves and not necessarily because of compatible play styles. A possible developmental trajectory is that children initially prefer same-sex peers because of similar sex and later similar play styles help to continue and strengthen same-sex preference.

Future Directions

- Because this study utilized line drawings of children, the next study will show children videotapes of other children playing and assess their preferences.
- Because the literature is inconsistent in whether or not toys influence children's peer preferences, another experimental study will examine the influence of gender, play styles, and stereotypical toys.

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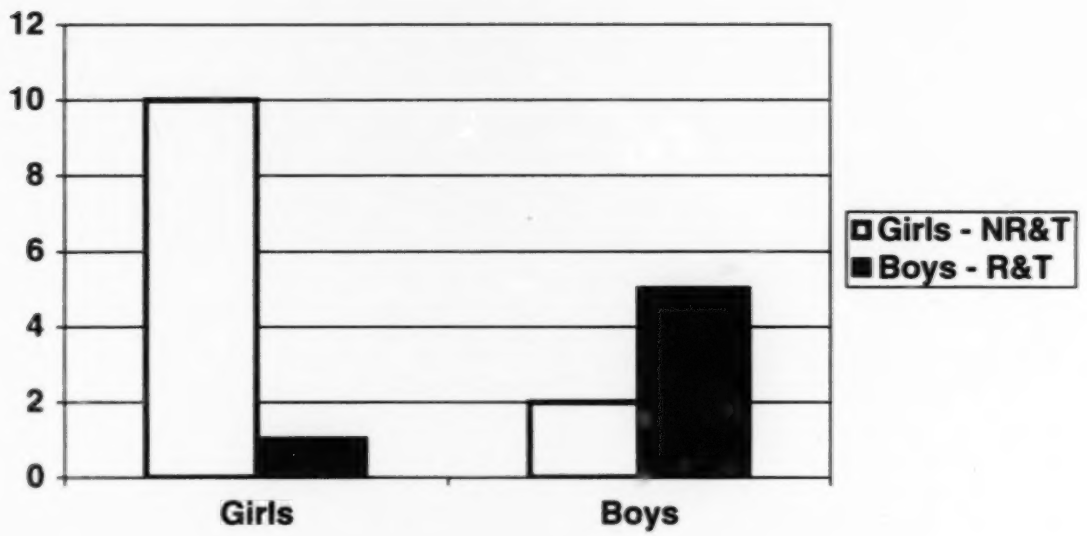
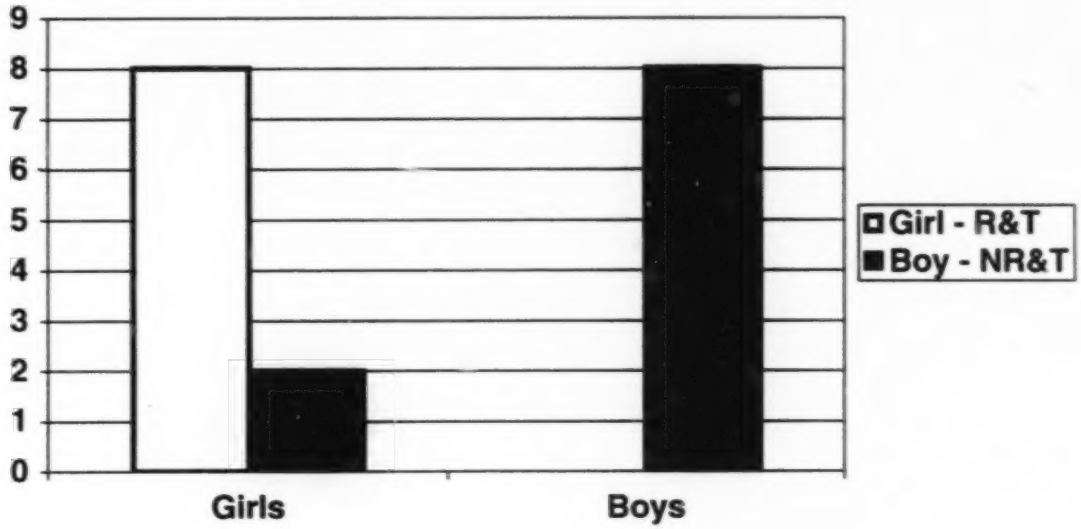
Children preferred same-sex playmates whose play styles were compatible with their own



$X^2 (1, N = 18) = 8.65, p < 0.05$

Children preferred same-sex playmates even when the play style was incompatible with their own



X^2 (1, N = 18) = 11.6, p < .01